



Iowa Children's Justice

October 2011

Engaging Families in the Court Process

October Topic

Iowa's Blue Print for Forever Families

Iowa's permanency blueprint identifies the importance of engaging families. Engaging families includes not only building a trust based relationship, but includes the family in shared decision making, without which, you cannot be truly successful in helping the family. The blueprint states:

"Outcomes improve when youth and their parents are active participants in their own planning and service provision. When families are full partners in the process, when we expect them to participate in their own future, not only do they benefit, the system does as well. Conversations improve when parents and youth are sitting at the planning table, and those conversations will more often lead to a workable mutually agreed upon plan."

The Iowa Blueprint for Forever Families can be found at Iowa Children's Justice Webpage:

http://www.iowacourts.gov/Administration/Childrens_Justice/Childrens_Justice/index.asp

DHS strategies for engagement

Iowa Department of Human Services practice principles focus on engaging families as full partners in all aspects of case management: assessment, developing a plan, selecting services to meet needs, monitoring the effectiveness of interventions, and revising strategies as necessary. DHS achieves full partnerships with family members through honesty, genuineness, and respectful interactions. Two examples of tools used to engage families are the family team decision making meetings and development of family interaction plans.

Principles of permanency

Engaging Families in Meaningful Hearings

"Some families can engage with the Court when they may not be able to engage with other interveners. With the advent of "one judge, one family," the judge is a constant in a family's life and may be the greatest influence. One parent said to me, 'I didn't know I could be successful until the judge thought I could.'"

Iowa Children's Justice Director Gail Barber

Engaging families and youth in a meaningful court process relies on a welcoming and helpful court environment and the family's or youth's active participation. Families are empowered during court hearings when their views and opinions are valued by the judge and they are asked about their unmet needs from the bench.

Judges' contribution to engagement and accountability

The courts' oversight role to track and monitor engagement of the family, as full partners in planning and service provision, provides a significant contribution to accountability of the whole child welfare system. Judges inquiry can reinforce that engagement is foundational to successful work with the family.

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Judges' contribution to engagement and accountability

Questions that determine whether the family is engaged include:

- Upon entering the case plan into evidence, the parents can be asked –
 - What language are you most comfortable speaking and reading? Have you been provided this plan in your language? How?
 - How did you participate in developing this case plan?
 - Can you tell the court what is required of you in this plan?
 - Do you believe the services in this case plan will help your family? Do you think that they will help resolve the issues that have resulted in placement of your child?
 - Is there anything you believe you need that is not included in this plan?
- Upon review of progress toward permanency, the parents can be asked –
 - How did you participate in updating this case plan?
 - What progress has been made? How have the services provided been helpful to your family?
 - Are there other interventions that would be helpful?

Ensuring Access to Justice

Judges ensure that the courtroom is a place where all who appear are treated with respect, patience, dignity, courtesy and as part of the problem-solving process. Juvenile courts are child and family-centered and presumptively open to the public. Children and parents have the opportunity to be present in court and meaningfully participate in their case planning and in the court process. Judges to see that all children and each parent are afforded their constitutional rights to due process. Juvenile court judges, as the gatekeepers to the foster care system and guardians of the original problem solving court, engage families, professionals, organizations and communities to effectively support child safety, permanency, and well-being. Judges encourage the court system to respond to children and their families with both a sense of urgency and dignity.

Assuring that families understand the court process helps make court hearings meaningful to them:

- Can you tell me what this hearing is about?
- What family members and/or other important people should be involved in this process with us?
- Do you understand the petition? (review petition with parties)
- Do you understand what happened here today?
- Do you understand what the next steps are?
- Do you have any questions for the court?

Key Principles for Permanency Planning for Children, NCJFCJ Permanency Planning for Children Department, *Adopted by the NCJFCJ Board of Trustees – July 23, 2011*

For more information about the Blueprint

The Iowa Blueprint for Forever Families can be found at Iowa Children's Justice Webpage:

http://www.iowacourts.gov/Administration/Childrens_Justice/Childrens_Justice/index.asp

The Permanency Summit materials can be found at:

http://www.iowacourts.gov/Administration/Childrens_Justice/Childrens_Justice/Permanency_Summit/

For more information about Iowa Children's Justice

For more information about Children's Justice contact Gail Barber, Director, at gail.barber@iowacourts.gov.

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